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S.P.L.A.S.H.
SALES PLATFORM STUDIES FOR HE

S.P.L.A.S.H - SALES PLATFORM STUDIES FOR HIGHER EDUCATION

TASK 1.3 FOCUS GROUP – GENERAL REPORT



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1. Introduction

In developing on-going customer relationships required in a global business world, nowadays' businesses are demanding greater numbers of well-trained salespersons and sales managers with, at the same time, high levels of professionalism and skills (Deeter-Schmeltz & Kennedy, 2011). The U.S. Bureau of Labour Statistics (2019) indicated that 14.54 million workers are currently employed in sales-related positions, those are critical in building and maintaining customer bases for businesses, especially in the service and wholesale sectors. This number is projected to grow 3% from 2016 to 2026, which will result in about 458,700 new sales positions that will need to be filled on an annual basis (Spiller, Kim, and Aitken, 2019).

The role of salespeople in the business-to-business (B2B) context has evolved because of rapid technological developments (Hunter and Perreault, 2007; Hughes and Ogilvie, 2019), as well as growing business complexity and environmental uncertainty (Sharma et al., 2020). The concept of sales has morphed from a 20th-century model focused only on selling products and services to a 21st-century model of building and maintaining long-term relationships (Ballestra, Cardinali, Palanga, & Pacelli, 2017). As customers place more value on the advice provided by salespeople, suppliers have rapidly recognized the key role their sales force plays in relational exchange.

Job opportunities in the field of professional sales are fast growing, with sales organizations striving to hire sales students who are prepared to embark on a sales career (Magnotta et al., 2020).

This is why the SPLASH project aims to create, test, disseminate and systematize an original learning format, based on e-learning platforms, for courses on international sales and digital selling at European level, in order to develop the skills for university (undergraduate) students, enrolled in business, marketing and sales university programs.

The main idea of this project is to analyse a series of e-learning platforms that host lessons on sales and create new content suitable for an increasingly internationalized and digital-oriented scenario. These new contents will be created in the form of OERs (in the form of interactive video training pills and narrative branched scenarios) and an adaptability/adaptation manual will be released to adapt the existing platforms to the new content that will be developed.

The S.PLA.S.H. project first intellectual output, it is therefore intended to update the state of art of the sales education in Europe, it with a particular focus on the theme of international sales and digital selling.

After analyzing the literature on sales education (task 1.1) and the training offer at European level of sales universities and the point of view of sales scholars (task 1.2), the focus group (1.3) intends to capture the businesses' point of view.

The synthesis of the various research will flow into the creation of a blended training program that will enrich the current offer of sales training at university level. In particular, the blended learning method combines the use of e-learning platforms and the social learning theory for higher education as simulations of real work situations and competitions.

The present document summarizes the results of the qualitative field research conducted in the various countries of the partnership (Italy, Austria, Denmark, Finland), which aims to highlight the point of view of businesses and sales professionals in relation to the main skills and competences necessary for a future candidate, focusing on BtoB sales in international contexts and considering the role of sales technologies in carrying out this job in today's marketplace.

The report is structured as follows: first, the research methodology implemented is exposed as well as the research design and data collection strategy and process. Then, the characteristics of the international sample involved in the research are illustrated and subsequently the results of the analysis, together with some conclusive considerations.

2. Focus group methodology

The focus group is a scientific investigation technique that refers to the semi-structured group interview managed by a moderator, to obtain the maximum information and focus on the topics covered, without losing the spontaneity and emerging topics and requests of the respondents, unknown to researchers.

The moderators, or the academic experts who conducted the group interviews, ensured the completeness and balance between the exploratory and in-depth requests in the topics covered in the data reception phase.

The interview or focus group session, implied the direct request for information and expectations from the participants, based on their knowledge and professional experience, but also projective techniques, which allow to activate a dialogue between the interviewee and the dimension that it is investigated, projecting the investigation towards the prefixed goal more easily, favouring free and rich answers.

Therefore, this research phase involved 6-10 companies in each of the 4 countries in online focus group and deep interview sessions, for a total of 27 subjects.

The objective was to understand the needs of knowledge and skills of graduates to hire in sales positions (international and digital sales), to detect the actual point of view on the educational needs for future candidates for the sales profession and thus close the gap with the results that emerged from the academic and educational side.

Indeed, the subjects involved were sales managers, HR Manager or consultant, CEO and entrepreneurs of SMEs working in BtoB international contexts. In particular, the researchers have selected BtoB non-trade sectors that are relevant in the partners' context. The data collection was carried out between December 2020 and January 2021, from the 4 S.PLA.S.H. academic partners in Italy, Austria, Denmark and Finland.

The focus groups were conducted to ensure the best comprehensibility of the topic and to foster the discussion by every group of subjects, with different levels of education and experience.

The research was conducted by partners following a previously realized *Focus group guide* that indicated the purposes of research, the subjects to include and recommendations to manage the focus group. The common structure let obtain comparable results, and the semi-structured research method, such as focus group, allowed interaction, free flow of ideas and discussion about issues emerged during interviews.

The partnership collaborated and shared a focus group guide, on four macro-topics, as summarised in table 1.

Table 1. Focus group topics

<p>1st part</p> <p>Please refer to one critical issue/episode you had to face, concerning BtoB sales involving international sales and digital technologies. Please provide this example and discuss the main capabilities and skills that helped solving the problem and that would be important for a future candidate to be already trained on.</p> <p>(optional for deep understanding)</p> <p>How could you describe the competencies needed in international B2B sales?</p> <p>What kinds of skills do you consider important if you think about people/yourself working in international B2B sales?</p> <p>What are the main sales technologies you think are essential to conduct international BtoB sales? (social selling, communication technologies, CRM, etc.)</p> <p>2nd part</p> <p>Are there any new/emerging requirements of international customers on the salespeople of the suppliers? Are there any requirements of international customers on the salespeople decreasing concerning importance?</p> <p>Do you see any changes in the approach of selling to international B2B-customers?</p> <p>Does this have any impact on the skills, knowledge, competences of your salespeople?</p> <p>Do you see any changes in the communication with international B2B-customers?</p> <p>Does this have any impact on the skills, knowledge, competences of your salespeople?</p> <p>3rd part</p> <p>Are there new jobs / roles? emerging or gaining importance in the last years which are in the field of international B2B-sales?</p> <p>new/emerging job positions, roles?</p> <p>less important job positions, roles?</p> <p>4th part</p> <p>Please fill in the short survey and the discuss together each participant's point of view</p> <p>Interviewee's information - age, gender, role, business, institution/firm characteristics, education, years of experience</p> <p>Given your role and professional experience, please specify the skills required to graduate sales positions candidates.</p> <p>Please evaluate the relevance of the following topics to be mastered by sales positions candidates.</p> <p>Please provide suggestions regarding new topics you would like to see added to in sales courses.</p>
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Source: Own elaborations

The focus group session started on a group discussion sharing one critical issue/episode faced by each interviewee, concerning BtoB sales involving international sales and digital technologies. These experiences allowed to discuss the main capabilities and skills that helped solving the problem and would be crucial for a future candidate to be already trained on.

Then, the topics covered by focus groups were any new/emerging requirements of international customers on the salespeople of the suppliers, possible developments in the approach of selling to international B2B-customers, any impact on the skills, knowledge, competences of your salespeople, and modifications in the communication with international B2B-customers.

The focus groups were conducted in the interviewees first language, and the research teams provided for translation. Final reports and results have been presented in English to guarantee the best results elaboration and comparability.

3. Data collection and sample characteristics

The researchers carried out the data collection autonomously between December 2020 and January 2021, with focus group and deep interview sessions. The various samples characteristics are summarized in table 2.

Table 2: sample characteristics

COUNTRY	ITALY	AUSTRIA	DENMARK	FINLAND
	1 focus group 6 participants	1 focus group 5 company representatives 2 HEI representatives	2 focus groups 4 participants 3 participants	7 single interviews
AGE	Range= 39-63; Average=49			
GENDER	1 F; 5 M	6 M, 1 F	6 M; 1 F	7 M
ROLES	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 3 CEO export manager CGO Innovation manager 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Managing Directors Head of Business Development Head of International Sales Chief Sales Officer, Co-Owner 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Sales Manager Consultant & Board Member CCO Head of B2B Sales and Marketing Manager Independent Consultant Sales Manager 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> VP Sales & Marketing, 2 Sales Director 2 Sales Manager Innovation Director Export Director

Source: Own elaborations

The 27 subjects involved were carefully selected following a maximum variation criterion to achieve data saturation in the various countries, particularly trying to incorporate the points of view of the most relevant BtoB sectors of the various countries. Among these, the most represented are various BtoB industries and particularly manufacturing, which represent 30% of the overall sample, together with Education, Energy and ICT, for a further 23%, and other sectors such as logistics, hospitality, industrial design and many others. About half of the sample is made up of CEOs (N=6) and sales managers (N=6), along with other key corporate roles and some sales scholars (N=2), included to enrich the debate and stimulate discussion.

4. Findings

1. International customers emerging needs

Over the last few decades, rapid advances in digital technologies, popularly referred to as the fourth industrial revolution (Syam and Sharma, 2018; Singh et al., 2019), are disrupting well-established sales practices and upturning well-known sales theories, just as they are opening new and exciting opportunities for innovation and creativity in sales practice and research (Baumgartner et al., 2016; Grove et al., 2018).

An interesting theme under discussion is how customer needs and expectations have changed over the years and how firms are adapting the selling approaches, the communication, the skills and competences required from the salespeople.

Digitalization is playing an increasingly important role in the growth of firms and is leading to structural and strategic transformations (Hervé, Schmitt, and Baldegger, 2020).

With the advent of digital technologies, a new social paradigm is emerging, and disruptive changes are an important part of future progress. Characterized by the convergence of many emerging technologies, whose core is data (big data, artificial intelligence, internet of things, etc.), digitalization leads firms to radical transformations in their systems and processes, as well as in their management methods and workforce. For instance, by reducing operating costs and improving interactions among ecosystem stakeholders – including customers, partners, suppliers and distributors – nascent digital technologies are playing an increasingly important role in company growth (Reuber & Fischer, 2011, 2014; Nambisan, 2017).

In general, digitalization impacts internationalization processes of firms in terms of accessibility of resources, skills, and competence acquisition, as well as in terms of the potential for learning and knowledge-development in foreign markets (Coviello et al., 2017).

Internationalization and digitalization have allowed major comparison and increasing competition, even in highly technical and specific sectors.

Technology has become an essential element for working, particularly after Covid-19.

To control the COVID-19 pandemic, physical distancing, and quarantine measures were mandated. In an effort to meet this mandate while trying to maintain the status quo, various types of human behavior (e.g., shopping, learning, working, meeting, and entertaining) shifted from offline to online, resulting in an accelerated diffusion of emerging digital technologies among ordinary people, while the digital divide further increases between citizens with versus without access to the technologies (Vargo et al., 2020).

Interestingly, several companies present a heavily digitalised processes: the sales process takes place entirely online, from social networks, to demos, to webinars, to post-sales assistance. Over

time, companies have faced and managed specific issues, such as signing contract online, giving more importance to the “paperwork” and reassurance of the customer, and trying to streamline documents and activities. In addition, the software CRM often is used with a singular approach, trying to adapt it to company’s needs.

The problem-solving approach is linked to a strong communication approach to the problem resolution process, as opposed to the previous technical approach characterized by the absence of each form of interaction. Now, customers are immediately heard, answered and reassured on the problem. Moreover, they have noticed an increasingly structured and professional marketing approach, large-scale content marketing and digital marketing.

Customers require competence, high specialization and ability to add value, anticipate or avoid problems before they happen.

Understanding what business the customers represents an emerging need, especially with respect to quickly grasping the customers’ perspective in sales.

Technical selling is hard to copy and thus, it is worth to invest in training measures in that field.

English and other foreign languages will be even more necessary in the future.

Today, with the increase of competition and decrease of time to market, negotiation, machinery design and realization are very strict and specifically defined in contracts and commission documents.

The current market requires a more technology-oriented type of sales.

Retail and distribution customers tend to be conservative, and their needs are basically the same as some years ago. Instead, the marketing professionals they tend to be more innovative. Salesperson must be able to handle various digital and analog communication options available, with the substantial ability to convey trust to the customer.

It is also crucial to be able to stay relevant despite the fact that customers have a lot of information available about salespeople. Customers expect truthfulness, and will use resources to investigate if a supplier acts responsibly or not, in terms of quality, sustainability, etc. It is a requirement that suppliers have complete control over and respect human rights, working environment, etc., especially for the large customers who do not want to be connected to someone who are not sustainable and responsible.

In conclusion, a salesperson should be educated to use emotional skills, that is being capable of creating trust and understanding of how to “read” the client and his/her needs.

2. Emerging jobs/roles

Findings show that the dynamics emerged most strongly are that of a greater demand for the proper attitude (relational, learning oriented), education in technical aspects, marketing and sales, digital skills.

Other new roles are the following: upgrade of inside sales; upgrade of classical office clerks; customer success manager for better supporting and caring for the customer; sales data analyst (supporting sales with evaluation data); introducing a role of "sales excellence" (that is an internal person who deals with the sales process) and a "technical sales support" (that is a technician with an inside sales role).

Solution and value based oriented salespeople, who are able to orchestrate a sales team to create unique solutions for the individual customer, are necessary. Other new emerging roles are represented by a new mix between marketing and salespeople. In addition, customer segmentation, data understanding, and interpretation, project management, and digital marketing are relevant to manage the relationship with customers.

Finally, today the efficiency and professionalism are needed. Each meeting has to be prepared well and all materials has to be world class. The customer expects that the salesman has expertise. The solution consists of products, services and after-sales assistance.

3. Sales skills

Technology has accelerated sales operations. Advances in technology are not only facilitating customer interactions but also allowing supplier organizations to have a better understanding of their cost structures and customer profitability. Aiming to increase selling efficiency, reduce costs, and increase customer value, business-to-business (B2B) companies are increasingly digitizing sales channels and complementing their sales forces with channels that require online rather than personal interaction (Thaichon et al., 2018).

It is crucial to control the whole relationship online: maintaining contact with the support of social network such as LinkedIn, managing presentations, closures, etc.

Findings shows that the most important innovative hard skills needed for the future of organizations include: adaptive selling; solution selling; social selling; contact with prospects and customers with platforms; leveraging social media; keeping the human relationship but connecting online; moving the sales process online from beginning to end, adjusting sales presentations; adopting very simple bureaucratic processes suitable for finalizing sales online; marketing and sales integration.

AI can transform sales processes and customer interactions in a wide variety of ways, virtually changing the way business is conducted. However, several researchers highlighted a lack of clarity regarding how digital technologies will shape opportunities and threats for the (1) sales

profession in terms of its contribution toward creating value for customers, organizations, and society and (2) sales professionals, both as employees in organizations and as individuals as self, seeking growth, fulfilment, and status in the functions they serve and roles they live (Singh et al., 2019).

A key issue emerged is that salespeople often do not know how to use the digital tools at their disposal.

Despite the profound transformation of sales roles, a set of 'traditional' skills will still be relevant in the future. The importance of a quality-based offering and negotiation, post-selling support, expertise and trust emerges. Technology makes the difference, but the human personal touch will always be determinant. Relationships already established offline can also continue online or mediated by technology, but it is difficult to imagine an entirely online sales process. Increasing demands for international solution selling call for a better understanding of the interpersonal communication competence required of sales professionals (Koponen, Julkunen, and Asai, 2019). Several research suggest that one way that firms can help manage the satisfaction of their customers is through their sales force, which is the key player in the actual interaction with buyers and they engage in relationship building processes during B2B solution selling (Panagopoulos et al., 2017).

A recurring theme is that salespeople are often unable to communicate with customers. They do not know the business activities and challenges that customers face. The ability to understand and communicate customer value is significant, considering that value is co-created. It is also fundamental to know how to adapt to the customer's needs.

A set of required new skills and competences emerged as critical in B2B-sales. First, business acumen is the understanding customers' business and represents a combination of knowledge and skills informed by experience. Business acumen empowers employees with big-picture understanding and better decision-making. Secondly, storytelling for sales – in terms of how to formulate targets, topics, technical details, implicit information in an attractive way – is important to create more engagement and entertainment for prospects. Thirdly, other common skills locked-for by employers include hybrid and digital relationship management skills (with reference to the awareness of various possibilities to keep up the contact with customers in remote situations); competence in using team-selling & complex meetings; knowledge and use of sales funnel, BI and CRM; ability to use digital tools for sales and practical experience (such as Mural, LinkedIn, Mentimeter, etc.); technical knowledge as a differentiator (with reference to solution based sales/industrial communication).

Business organizations often observe a lack of technically qualified sellers. There should be a good mix of people who know the industry, the product, the customers, and have a critical approach, thus a key point is that the salesperson should be an innovative business developer, with analytical skills.

Finally, emotional skills will be the most required skills in sales (including intelligence, behaviour, capability of creating trust). They are recognized as a critical component of both personal and professional success. Having a high level of emotional intelligence allows a salesperson to sense, understand, and effectively apply the power of their own emotions during interactions with buyers to improve sales.

4. Key findings

The results of the research carried out are summarized in the following table (Table 1) and discussed in the following sections. The table shows the concepts, expressed as activities, skills or traits, which summarize the points of view of the professionals involved, as company representatives, on the skills and emerging priorities in sales.

Table 1 – Concepts and Representative quotes

Concepts	Representative quotes	Frequency
<p>Personal characteristics: Business acumen; Emotional intelligence and cultural intelligence</p>	<p><i>“You need to be prepared and understand what emotional intelligence means: Like recognizing the needs and identify – I mean – read your customers’ and your own feelings.” (Finland)</i></p> <p><i>“Most essentials competences are emotional skills (using words like “understanding human being and feelings”). This goes past everything else, as well as technologies and other CRM tools.” (Finland)</i></p> <p><i>“You are never “ready as a sales person”. You need to understand better human beings and different phases of sales processes.” (Finland)</i></p> <p><i>One of the biggest changes has been globalization. A professional seller is expected to have international expertise. Domestic customers are growing through satellite factories, joint ventures, etc., so language skills and cultural expertise are required. Foreign companies are often involved in domestic companies as well. For example, the Chinese deal with them differently than the domestic ones, even though the company is the same.” (Finland)</i></p> <p><i>“Basic knowledge is a prerequisite, and skills like capability of listening, adapting to different situations and different personalities and different cultures. You should not be one those who talk about their own cause but those who understand how the company's solutions could be applied to the customer's environment.” (Finland)</i></p> <p><i>“Technical understanding is not so important, but how can I involve experts in the process? From my point of view, a salesperson is a moderator, a project manager who has a good understanding of when to involve whom well. Especially because of the fast pace of life - there is a</i></p>	<p>Medium</p>

	<p>danger of only talking about CRM. Intelligence has to be brought in." (Austria)</p>	
<p>Negotiation: Complex selling and time pressure; (Digital and f2f) Relational VS Transactional Skills</p>	<p><i>"Internationalization and digitalization have allowed major comparison and increasing competition even in their highly technical and specific sector. This is not easy as the offering has such a great level of specificity, the negotiation has changed. Some have taken the opportunity to evolve and improve (German) with a strong market orientation, while others have remained the same, some of them have closed (Italian)." (Italy)</i></p> <p><i>"Customers require competence, anticipating problems and avoiding technical issues before they happen. Today it has become more difficult as the competition has increased and time to market has shortened significantly, therefore the negotiation, machinery design and realization are very strict, it has become more formal and the relationship is particularly defined in contracts and commission documents, those tend to be strict." (Italy)</i></p> <p><i>"The human relationship is and will be essential, we must figure out how to do that online." (Italy)</i></p> <p><i>"Story-telling is a good way to train. [...] capturing short, concise topics and playing them back. This can also be trained well. Look right and left in training, get to know processes, see procedures. The better they are in sales, they see what's going on in the company. It's much easier to draw a picture of where you want to go when I have the opportunity to immerse myself in many companies [i.e., internships] in addition to my training." (Austria)</i></p> <p><i>"Competence-wise, [foreign] language[s] is a big issue. Salespeople - not a matter of course for many, especially not for those who are 15-20 years in business." (Austria)</i></p> <p><i>"You need to know the customer's needs before you start selling. You have some professionals who know all the technical things, but do not know the customer's needs - We have specialists who have been given a sales role, but they are not well trained in making value-based sales." (Denmark)</i></p> <p><i>"The ability to speak to the customer's valuation. As well as the ability to be able to talk to someone at a higher level with customers. In value-based sales, it is very important that you can get hold of the CEO, because they are the ones who can stay in a dialogue that is not only about price, but also about value for the company." (Denmark)</i></p> <p><i>"Customers have different needs and focus on solving this need: how can you add value? There are different approaches to being able to solve the customers' problems: add and take out. But salespeople must be able to look beyond an urgent need to be solved." (Denmark)</i></p> <p><i>"The most important thing is to understand the customer. It starts there and the success ends there. Knowing a little more about the customer than he or she realizes</i></p>	<p>High</p>

	<p><i>themselves. That is what makes it possible to create unexpected value.” (Denmark)</i></p> <p><i>“This profession requires a capability to make decisions. You need to be able to ask your client, do you buy it? If the client declines, you need to continue the dialog and help the client make the decisions. This is something every sales person should learn and can learn.” (Finland)</i></p> <p><i>“Demand for good communication skills and good people skills are increasing. Selling will be done from one human being to another.” (Finland)</i></p> <p><i>“To be able to work for international B2B sales one has to have technical skills as well as negotiation skills and emotional skills.” (Finland)</i></p>	
<p>Team player skills: Multilevel selling, Building right team for negotiations</p>	<p><i>“New for us [...]: Customer Success theme [...]. Support and care are extremely important to customers. People want to have faster feedback, better support. Customer Success Team, a new department has just been started.” (Austria)</i></p> <p><i>“It is significant to get prepared for the meetings by discussing with the client in advance and forexcample finding out who are participating from client’s side to be able to know what kind of team you should have with you. From time to time, the work reminds the role of the conductor.” (Finland)</i></p> <p><u><i>It can be a great advantage to have both representatives at the meeting, the technical one and the one with sales skills, the technical ones give security with the knowledge they have and the one with sales skills pushes the conversation forward so that it is not purely about the technica stuffl.(Denmark)</i></u></p>	<p>Medium</p>

Sales analytics and technology:
Inside sales; Data, BI, CRM; Social selling

"The topic CRM, even for the older generation, often well-skilled, [now] acceptance is there. But this competence had to be built up, the shyness had to be overcome. Social media competence, Facebook, LinkedIn - was not a matter of course." (Austria)

"One position is new - the [sales] data analyst, who supports sales with evaluations. BI programmes in particular. Since then, things have been going on in evaluation, things we hadn't thought of before. The office staff are also taking on a more active role." (Austria)

"Role "Sales Excellence" - an internal person who deals with the sales process. A 2nd role in the factories: "Technical Sales Support", a technician [...] who has a kind of inside sales role, but more in the direction of making offers and working out concepts." (Austria)

"But what I think is, in the future, you have to know how to use these [digital] tools. Mural, flipcharts, sticky notes, mentimeters, - just a small fraction, but these people should be able to handle all these tools. The young could be a bit ahead of us older ones! Then at the client's, everything has to work, it shouldn't be bumpy." (Austria)

"Customer relations applications CRM are critical. At this moment quite a lot is solved by using information about customers. Also understanding IHT (internet of things)." (Finland)

"The most important communication technologies for sales are CRM, softwares, where you can archive the history of your client, and order delivery system." (Finland)

Medium

<p>Value-based selling: Strategic view over customer's business</p>	<p><i>"Solution expertise, and certainly higher expertise than 10 years ago. Customer acquisition, trust gained, contact person [...]. Nowadays, customers demand higher specialization. The IT expert wants to talk to someone who adds value. He doesn't have to understand everything like a software developer, but he too is a customer. Sales funnel, solution competence, process expertise [are the keywords]" (Austria)</i></p> <p><i>"Customers require competence, anticipating problems and avoiding technical issues before they happen." (Austria)</i></p> <p><i>"Customers require competence, anticipating problems and avoiding technical issues before they happen." (Austria)</i></p> <p><i>"Application engineering. You get the customer attention immediately when you show the customer that you understand what business they are in. This is even more relevant in tele-selling. You don't have the time. The CRM system gives the tele-seller the chance to see immediately about customers' fields of activity. If he can explain in a few minutes what customer needs, then that's a good start." (Austria)</i></p> <p><i>"Suddenly you have to deal with buyers who don't really know what is needed. Our reaction was to move more and more in the direction of technical selling. The sales engineer becomes more important. Technical competence is difficult to copy, so we also invest a lot in training measures." (Austria)</i></p> <p><i>"The most important communication technologies for sales are CRM, softwares, where you can archive the history of your client, and a delivery system for orders." (Finland)</i></p> <p><i>"For example social media like LinkedIn, the company is not yet using it as effectively as it could. Social media is also a risk, there must be a good understanding of how social media is used (e.g. information leaks). The traditional (outbound) method is needed, the generation of leads is increasingly occurring through inbound. The importance of inside sales is growing. The importance of webinars and other postings is increasing." (Finland)</i></p> <p><u>It is important that you realize that you have to sell to several levels, that you adapt the language ect. To where you are. It would be good if you could make a value-based sales interview at a high level in a company, so that the management would subsequently demand the products.</u>(Denmark)</p>	<p>Medium</p>
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Source: own elaboration

4. Conclusions

This research work made it possible to explore the issues and perceptions on skills in BtoB sales in the international and digital sphere, in 4 European countries.

As emerged, great importance is given to the preparation of the salesperson, to his/her knowledge and skills in sales, marketing, digital selling, in particular social selling and inside sales. There are various priorities on the skills of the salespeople of tomorrow, but above all the advanced sales approaches and the sales technology related skills prevail.

Hard skills are differentiated into traditional and innovative, which include above all the use of approaches to sales, and advanced, specific types of selling (Value based selling, solution selling), and also the use of technologies, or sales digitalization / transformation.

Among the soft skills, many have paid great importance listening, empathy, learning orientation, proactivity and, in particular, to Emotional Intelligence.

Generally speaking, customers continue ask for solutions that bring real benefits, that are convenient and fast, anticipating solutions and avoiding problems. On the other hand, the competition and the increasing time pressure, also in online encounters, have pushed forward the importance of adapting the whole sale process online (time pressure, pitching) and also redefining the boundaries between transactional and relational selling relationships.

Businesses who have already started the digital transition highlight the role of simplicity of use of channels and technologies, the streamlining of procedures and bureaucracy, proximity in every aspect and reassurance in the face of difficulties. A key issue will be to balance face-to-face and remote encounters, the inside sales, the role of team selling and the collaboration with experts, the sales funnel, BI and CRM related capabilities, the business acumen.

The technical skills in sales have emerged cross country as a controversial issue, since sales personnel can either master the technical know how to manage complex and technical sales with added co-design requirements and challenges by managing team-based selling.

In the subsequent steps of the work of the S.PLA.S.H. project, these stimuli will be taken and put into a system to create the foundations of an education program design that is balanced and that above all responds to the lack of sales education in Europe, through the introduction of targeted, specific sales teachings, tailored to the needs of companies, such as emerged from this study.

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